

GREENWorks

Ideas for a Cleaner Environment

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No Butts About It ... It's Littering!

Have you ever wondered when did it become socially acceptable to litter with cigarette butts?

A 2009 *New York Times* article reveals that people who do not litter with other objects, frequently do so with cigarette butts. Why? Perhaps it is because many smokers are under the misimpression that cigarette butts are biodegradable. They are NOT. Cigarette filters, which are what is normally tossed, are made of cellulose acetate, a plastic that simply breaks down into smaller pieces, but never fully degrades.

And it's not just about throwing away bits of plastic. The discarded cigarette butt releases toxic chemicals, such as nicotine, cadmium and benzene to the environment, which slowly work their way into our water and soil, especially it seems the sand at our beaches.

The New Hampshire Marine Debris to Energy program tracks and cleans up debris from New Hampshire's seacoast. Last year, they counted over 14,000 cigarette butts collected from state beaches. In April, 30 members from the Green Alliance at UNH held a Hampton Beach cleanup, and collected 1,000 cigarette butts in just *one hour*.

But it's not only on beaches where litter from tobacco products is a problem. Cities, towns and highways are also littered with cigarettes. Twenty-five percent or more of litter collected on city streets is attributed to cigarette butts. Nationwide, statistics show that cigarette butts account for 28-33 percent of litter!

Many municipalities, organizations and individuals are taking steps to combat this issue. A few years ago, the city of Concord enacted a law that prohibits or restricts smoking at several parks and recreation areas popular with children. Around the state, the group Breathe NH hosts an annual event called Bag the Butts, which organizes groups to pick up butts in their communities. The Blue Ocean Society for Marine Conservation organizes several coastal beach cleanups in New Hampshire, and cigarette butts always represents the largest number of items collected during these events.

While cigarette butts may be small, cumulatively they are a large problem. Wildlife and humans alike are negatively impacted by both the litter and the toxins. Fortunately, there are also steps we can take to minimize their impact. If you smoke, please don't litter. Dispose of your cigarette butts responsibly. All of us should speak up if we see someone littering, regardless of whether it is a cigarette butt or another piece of trash. It is all littering. For more information on what you can do to keep tobacco products in the ashtray and out of our environment, visit http://des.nh.gov/organization/divisions/water/wmb/beaches/cigarette_butts.htm.